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ABSTRACT

Noting that effective writing requires organization, honesty, and personal experiences, this booklet offers suggestions for teaching students to write expository essays that are serious and truthful. The first section of the booklet suggests ways to teach students to organize their ideas, while the second section discusses both the value of teaching students to integrate personal experience with exposition and the appropriate use of personal narrative. The third section describes ways to help students get so involved with their subject that they become expert, develop a genuine intention to write, and consequently care for the truth of what they say. (HTH)

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Teaching Expository Writing

by

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Preface

Composition teachers sometimes pose the question: "How do we bridge the gap between the vibrant, exciting writing our students produce when they write about their experiences and the dull but essential expository writing they must know how to produce to succeed in college?" In this monograph Richard Murphy attacks this question in two ways. There need not, he says first, be a gap. The best expository writing by the masters of prose has always been enriched by the experiences of the writer. Further, writing about ideas need not be dull if the writer is taught to organize his or her material to show the relationships between ideas, and if the writer becomes so immersed in the subject that he or she writes as an expert. Given training in the techniques Rich describes herein, students from third grade through graduate school can write about ideas in a way that is vivid, serious, and true.

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Introduction

By "expository writing" or "exposition" I mean writing about ideas, discursive writing of description or analysis governed by an idea, what James Britton has called "transactional" writing, the kind of writing which in school includes fourth grade book reports and seminar papers for graduate courses.

Teaching such writing is sometimes a dispiriting task. Student essays are frequently insubstantial and incoherent, perfunctory and heartless. Every writing teacher I know gets such essays, and the consequent temptation for teachers is to assume that exposition is by nature "dull" and "boring." This is a widespread, if hidden, assumption. It is manifested in the back-to-basics principle that we all ought to grin and bear it in the teaching of writing. ("Sure, the essays are dull," the principle seems to say, "but this essay writing isn't supposed to be fun; it's work.") One high school teacher, I am told of (he must be somebody's caricature; he must not be real) reportedly tells his students that when it comes to writing essays they should try *not* to be creative, try *not* to be interesting. "I want to be BORED," he says to them year after grueling year.

After one of my colleagues at the University of Santa Clara had shared a research paper assignment with other faculty, she conceded with a shrug of her shoulders that it was probably no better than any other because the essays she got in response to it were dull. "Dull...dull... dull," she insisted, looking around at all of us, taking for granted that we all knew what she meant.

This attitude can be seen too, I think, in the fact that teachers tell their students to make their essays "interesting." Every semester I ask my new students to list the qualities of a "good" essay; always, at the top of the list, is "interesting." "You've got to grab your reader's interest," they say, and fairly enough. But what they mean by "interesting" is "clever," "unexpected," "decorated," and these reveal a lack of confidence in the intrinsic value of what they have to say. "Your introduction should be catchy," they say, echoing someone's prescription, because an introduction that simply declares its subject and aims is too "dull." Better to cast around for some gimmick, to go miles out to left field (or years back in history) to find some detail related to your subject by which to lure your readers, to trick them, into listening to what you have to say.

Thus the following, the first sentences of an introduction to a student

essay about why cigarette smoking should not be permitted in public places:

> Since its introduction to the thirteen colonies, tobacco has been a chief American crop. For the last three and a half centuries, most of the tobacco was used for one main and popular habit—smoking. Once considered chic during the roaring twenties, smoking has drawn much opposition....

Here he is, after all the stuff about the chief American crop and the roaring twenties, finally getting to the point about the propriety of smoking in public. But as much of an achievement as it represents—simply getting down to the point after such a tangential opening—this introduction was written under a false and disabling assumption. The writer did not believe that what he had to say was of any genuine value, that his essay was anything more than an exercise in the "stuffy" skills of exposition. He did not really believe that his readers wanted to know about public smoking; and he did not believe it, I think, because the teacher who told him to catch the reader's interest did not believe it either.

Our task in teaching exposition, then, is to persuade our students to believe in what they are doing, to take themselves and their ideas seriously in writing essays. Eudora Welty in two fine sentences has set the problem for us: "The trouble with bad student writing is the trouble with all bad writing. It is not serious and it does not tell the truth." Two of my students' essays may help to illustrate briefly how expository writing can be serious and truthful. In imitation of an assignment Josephine Miles gave to her 1948 freshman composition class,[1] I asked my students to write a twenty-minute essay in class about their home town. Here are two of those essays:

1.

> My hometown is Watsonville, California. Watsonville is a small town of about 20,000, which originated around the year 1860.
>
> The main source of business in Watsonville is agriculture. Located in the fertile Pajaro Valley between Monterey and Santa Cruz on the Pacific Coast, Watsonville's climate is ideal for growing lettuce, strawberries, artichokes, and especially apples. Watsonville is now the official apple capitol of the world.
>
> The people in Watsonville are like those of any small town, very conscious of what goes on and how things look to the public. In a small town, news travels very fast—especially bad news. Such is the case in Watsonville. We have our socially prominent families giving elegant dinners every Christmas Eve—you know—the ones in which everybody who's anybody is invited. We have the mayor who used to own a photography shop on Main Street. We have the old section of town, with our small town department stores and grocery stores. Very few chain stores come to Watsonville.

Watsonville is small now, but it used to be a very important railway stop, so what town there is grew fast. We even had a "Chinatown" section where the laborers lived. But the agriculture had to stay, so the city had to stop growing.

We still have the city plaza, which is as old as the city, and we still have the migrant workers. We have the tradition, the social exposure, and the problems of any small town. It's typical, but I could write volumes.

2.

My home town is San Jose, California. San Jose used to be a fairly decent place to live. It was not a hick town, but yet it didn't have the clutter or sprawl of San Francisco or L.A. Being such a nice place to live, however, had disadvantages in that many people who feel the same way, but who are not residents decide to become residents. The result is, that over the past fifteen years or so, San Jose has gained about 500,000 new inhabitants. Now I don't know about you, but I have a hard time getting along with 500,000 people strangers—especially when necessitates a complete change in the face of the city. Examples; Capitol Ave., a nice little two-lane road winding from a little beyond my old house to Milpitas, is now Capitol Expressway, a four to six lane monstrosity. Or take that huge field that used to be down the street from my old house; my friends and I used to chase squirrels up an down it's breadth on our way to school—and during the winter rains, ducks would migrate to wallow in the makeshift ponds. Now that piece of land has an apartment complex, a gas station, a Banco de San Jose, and a McDonald's, as well as an assorted housing tract here or there. I could name further examples, but it seems pointless to try to "go home again"—even in my mind. I regret that being so young I could not more fully appreciate those fields and orchards and little two lane roads. My memories are vague and it is often hard for me to picture San Jose as being any other way. This, to me, is the saddest fact of all.

The first student is a more technically skillful writer. In this timed exercise he wrote fluently and correctly, his syntax and punctuation sure, his paragraphs grouped reasonably. The second student left syntactic slips uncorrected ("people strangers," "when necessitates"), he punctuated erratically ("Examples;" "it's"), and he chose diction somewhat uncertainly ("up an down it's breadth"). But I think the second writing, not an essay, only a paragraph, is much better than the first for several reasons.

It has an idea, first of all, a *main* idea which governs its statements, giving them coherent organization. The first is a hodge-podge. When the twenty minutes were up, I asked my students to write down the main idea each essay expressed. The first student wrote: "Watsonville is a small,

typical, yet unique town." Leaving aside the contradiction between "typical" and "unique," this is not the idea which governs his essay; *no* idea governs his essay. What he wrote is a list of uncoordinated thoughts about his town: the first thing he thought about (population and date), then the next (agriculture), then the next, a series of topics that even he realized might have gone on indefinitely ("but I could write volumes").

The second student wrote: "the awful changes growth can make on a once nice town." Characteristically, his idea is not grammatically a statement, only a fragment, only a subject without a predicate to make it whole. But he knew intuitively and exactly what his idea was; when we have read his paragraph, we know too ("Growth has made awful changes on my once nice town") because this idea governs everything in his paragraph. From the assertion that San Jose "used to be" a nice place to live everything follows and converges handsomely in his sparely stated sadness at the loss.

The second is more forceful writing, too, because it is more personal, not confessional, but exploiting the experience of the writer in the service of his idea. The first student was standing back from his subject (his lack of an idea was partly responsible for this), outlining Watsonville as a silhouette with no scars, with no color. We have shops with no names and "we" with no "I." The second, however, names the sprawl ("a Banco de San Jose, and a McDonald's") and the streets ("Capitol Expressway"), and points us rhetorically to things we can see (the road winding "from a little beyond my old house," and "*that* huge field that used to be down the street").

As a result of both its idea and its personal focus, I think, the second is finally more substantial than the first, even though both writers had virtually unlimited information about their subject. The first writer happened to remember the date of founding, the kinds of crops, and several disparate facts about the history of Watsonville. These *are* facts, and presumably reported accurately. But they are finally thin, because they lack any relationship to each other, and unconvincing, because their writer seems to have had no commitment to them. We learn fewer facts about San Jose, but what we learn is denser, richer. It does not matter, we feel, whether the writer is accurate about the number of new people who have flocked to San Jose; he perceives and reports their awful effect on the city clearly—in the number of lanes and in the variety of new buildings needed to accommodate them. And he knows that the change is awful because he measures it against his memories (even only "vague" ones—a masterful rhetorical stroke) of the squirrels and ducks of the city's past. The writer of the first is a pretender; the writer of the second an expert.

In fact the achievement of the second writer—in twenty minutes, from a cold start—is astonishing, the more so because the assignment was so general and artificial. But I do not mean to evaluate the *writers* of these

two pieces. I mean to use their writing, instead, to define the problems we ought to address in teaching exposition. Students need to learn to organize what they have to say: they need to integrate their experience with their ideas so they can write both precisely and honestly: and they need to become expert about their subject so they can write with power and conviction. In other words, we must try to teach our students to write expository essays that are serious and that tell the truth.

The suggestions I have to offer aim at both.

I

The first suggestion is that we teach our students how to organize their ideas. I do not want to start qualifying what I have to say immediately, but it is not always the case that they need to know how to *put* organization *on* their material; sometimes, more often than not, they have to *discover* the organization that is implicit *in* their idea. But in either case, they need to know what organization *is*, so they can generate or recognize it.

First of all, we need not apologize about teaching organization. We are not cramping anybody's style; we are not prescribing artificial, unreal writing. We are teaching our students one of the most important things they can learn about their writing or their thought: that ideas are *statements* of *relationships*. When the five-paragraph essay is mistaught, it is taught as a formula (state the three things you're going to talk about, then write a paragraph about each, then a conclusion—presto!) What the formula neglects to make clear is that those "three things" are *related* to each other; that they are all constituents of some larger, governing idea; and that they are there in the essay at all only because of their relationship to each other.

Here is what I ask my students to do:

1. *Ask a question that requires a plural answer.*[2]
   - What were the results of the technological revolution?
   - Why (this question asks for reasons) should Gary Gilmore not have been executed?
   - What qualities make Volvo the car for people who think?

Such questions explicitly or implicitly require a plural answer with parallel parts that can provide organization for an essay.

2. *Answer the question in one sentence, specifying the parts.*
   - Some of the results of the technological revolution were an increase in production, a decrease in the need for manpower, and a concentration of wealth in the hands of those who owned the new machines.
   - Gary Gilmore should not have been executed because there is no evidence that the death penalty deters crime and because other criminals who have committed similar crimes have been given far less severe punishment.
   - Volvo is the car for people who think because it is comfortable, efficient, and safe.

Such plural answers provide an essay with its "main idea," what is often

called its "thesis statement." But what is usually not noticed or taught is the fact that it is the relationship between parts of the statement that provides the essay with its content and direction.

The thesis statement is often criticized for its length, criticized unjustly, as if length were an aesthetic defect. But it is not, as two long thesis statements will show; the first is long and clear, the second long and obscure.

> The six-year old affirmative action program at U.C. Davis should not have been ruled unconstitutional for the following reasons: the program could have contributed to the amelioration of the effects of hundreds of years of racial injustice in this country; other equally selective admissions policies have never been challenged; and the court decisions of recent years have established a legal precedent for the constitutionality of affirmative action programs.

This sentence might have stopped at "reasons," but it does not confuse the reader by going on to specify at length what those reasons are. Each of the reasons is announced clearly, and arranged clearly in a parallel list (first the "program," then the "policies," then the "decisions"). The writer has committed himself here to a specific idea and articulated that idea with precision for his reader.

The second example, however, shows how even a shorter statement may be confusing, not simply because its syntax is more complex, but because the writer was unsure of his idea.

> Although I don't smoke, I think it should be legal, because people should be able to enjoy smoking as long as they have concern for non-smokers, who in turn should not depend on bureaucratic laws, which would be ridiculously ineffective anyway, to handle such a simple everyday problem.

This is much more difficult to follow than the first thesis because each of its parts pulls the writer further away from his reasons for thinking that smoking should be legal. Here length is a liability to him and to his reader because it allows him to slip from the reasons to a requirement that he wants to place on non-smokers and then to a description of the futility of bureaucratic regulation. But length in itself is no disadvantage, so I encourage my students to elaborate the parts of their thesis statements, specifying as exactly as they can the relationship between them.

Such a thesis statement such a "plural answer," is the blueprint for an essay: an idea whose parts are each specified, arranged in a rhetorical order, and unified by a single stem which relates them to each other in a coherent whole. When students ask if they *have* to have *three* parts, they have misunderstood. The answer is no. They have to have more than one part to have an essay; otherwise, they can have no more than a paragraph. But the number of parts depends on their idea.

3. *Structure the essay, following the thesis statement exactly.*

Once they have the thesis statement formulated, it goes as the last sentence of the introduction, followed by one paragraph for each of the parts in the order in which they occur in the thesis.

But now I have to qualify again because this is not a formula for writing; it is instead a strategy for teaching organization. I have found all of these requirements helpful to students beginning to write essays of exposition, but none of them is absolute. The thesis statement may be formulated not first, but last, as in most cases it probably will be (just as the most accurate outlines and abstracts are usually written last) after the idea has been discovered in the writing of early drafts. It may go anywhere in the essay; it may even be left out. And its parts may be developed in any order and with any emphasis that fits the writer's rhetorical purpose. The persistent challenge of exposition for almost all of my students, however, lies in *sticking to* their idea, in governing what they say by that idea, in subordinating all their discussion to that point. It is to help them do this—to help them see that it can in fact be done—that I require them at first to follow their thesis statement exactly in the organization of their essay.

This plural-part thesis statement is a powerful teaching device: it provides students quickly with a simple paradigm for organization. Once they understand it, it can be varied: the parts do not need to be explicitly stated, the parts do not need to be parallel, the parts may be themselves multi-faceted. When we teach our students such variations (and there are others), we are making clear to them that they are not to "pre-fab" their essays. We are teaching them the principle of organization: that if an essay about an idea is to be understandable to us, then it must have a *point* and that point must be complex enough to establish and sustain relationships among subordinate ideas.

My students regularly report that this is the most valuable thing they learn in my writing classes. They have heard of "thesis statements" and "main ideas," some of them report, but they generally do not know what these things really are. Although some of them have even been taught the "five-paragraph essay," they have just learned to follow the formula; they usually do not understand what they are doing. The plural part thesis statement, however, helps them understand what they are doing, and it may be used at many grade levels. Instead of asking elementary school children to write a "report" on Peru or on dolphins or on the California missions, we should ask them to answer a question that will help them focus all their material. Most teachers do not ask such a question or help their students generate one: they say "discuss" or "report" and then give detailed instructions on handwriting and footnote form. My ten-year old son, for example, wrote an essay on Santa Clara according to such instructions. One of his chapters, however, illustrates in its order and coherence the possibility and value of teaching this kind of organization much earlier in the curriculum than we have thought appropriate.

When Father Fray Thomas de la Pena arrived in the Santa Clara Valley he met some Indians that were part of the Costanoan tribe. They were friendly and skillful.

One thing that they were good at was making arrowheads. They would make long skinny ones and stubby ones out of obsidian. Their arrowheads were all different colors like brown and black.

Two more things they were skillful at were woodworking and making baskets, they could make bows and axes and spears and they could make these things very smooth. The baskets they made were pretty and they were so tight that they could hold water.

Not only were they skillful but they were friendly and when Fr. Thomas had founded it the Indians used their skill to help build the mission.

Thesis statement, a paragraph on each part, and a conclusion in which the parts are deftly integrated (because they were friendly they used their skill to help).

The most persuasive testimony for me, however, comes from already accomplished student writers like the following woman. She came to Freshman Composition with wit, with an already highly developed sense of language, with the power to integrate her fresh perceptions with her thought. But she wrote in her journal that before this course she did not know how to write; that before we worked on the thesis statement, she did not realize either the value or the possibilities or order; and that then, suddenly, she understood. Here is the opening section of one of the essays she wrote:

My parents' house is very formal, and my brother Tim and I were expected to behave accordingly. We were taught to be neat and clean and, more important, to be sweet and gracious. We could never be wild. Although our house was big, everything was breakable, and we had very little room to play in. We lived in starched and pressed calm. Understandably, we adored any place that was different from our home.

We loved going to the Tuschons' house because it was such a mess. Their dogs lived inside and their cat had kittens in a closet. We could eat potato chips and Oreos without being seated at the table, and there were piles of unfolded clothes in the laundry room that we could crawl around in. The best part of their house, though, was the lower level, which belonged to their daughter Elizabeth. Elizabeth was between Tim and me in age, and she could do anything she wanted down there. Her mom never even came down. Down there, we could run in and out of the house without having to wash our hands and take off our shoes each

time. We could even throw food at each other. We left the T.V. on and the doll things out. Not having to worry about anyone taking it apart, we could build a covered wagon out of patio furniture and blankets. When we played hide-and-seek, Tim and I loved to hide in Elizabeth's fireplace. The messier the game, the more fun it was. My mother always looked like she was going to faint when we came home. She would put us in the bathtub immediately, while we were already planning the next visit.

My Aunt Nellie's little apartment in San Francisco was not messy, but we loved it because it was modest and informal....

I did not teach her to write such a wonderful phrase as "starched and pressed calm"; that came from her years of reading good writing and from an intuitive grasp of the power of figurative language. I did not teach her that in a single detail (such as their wearing shoes in the Tuschon house) she could capture the habits and spirits of both homes for us. But the thesis statement gave her an order. She compressed the multiple parts into "any place," each of the paragraphs of her essay describing a different place, and all of them unified by her childhood love of them. The organization is not the most remarkable virtue of her essay. It is a simple device. But it provided her, she said, with an elegant and lucid frame for her memories.

II

My second suggestion is that in teaching exposition we not isolate it from the personal experience of our students. We should not quarantine it in Advanced Placement classes (or even, for that matter, in English classes, as opposed to classes in art or biology). Neither should we set up for ourselves or for our students some false distinction between the "stuffy" essays of exposition and the "fun" narratives of personal experience. If we do, we will conceal a signal from ourselves, but not from our students, that exposition is "harder" than personal narrative, or that it is by nature "dull."

We should encourage our students, instead, to *use* their personal experience, to deploy it wherever it is relevant and rhetorically helpful, whatever their subject, whatever its form. They will not be accustomed to this suggestion. They will ask, puzzled: "Do you mean I can say 'I' in my essay?" Yes. Probably not in a paragraph explaining the physics of lava, but perhaps in an adjacent paragraph that describes the time you were dangerously close enough to *see* what boiling lava looks like.

Our students' resistance to this instruction should not be surprising. Wasn't everyone in America taught at some time or other to *not* use "I"? We all had the same teacher who, in order to help us broaden our focus beyond ourselves, to objectify—a good end—gave us a bad rule. I now have a graduate student still so handicapped by the rule that all the verbs she uses to write about her own thoughts or actions are in the passive voice, and when she cannot avoid referring to herself, she does so with a phrase like "this researcher." Another of my current students, back from two years of anthropological field work, reports that graduate professors in her department publicly abuse students for referring to themselves in their essays: "I don't want to know what YOU think!"

The inhibition is so strong that it is often hard to see where using our personal experience might be both relevant and rhetorically powerful in an expository essay. A recent group of remedial writing students at the University of California provides a nice example. Because their college entrance tests seemed to warrant it, they were required to take a three-hour diagnostic writing exam (the Subject-A exam). They were asked to read a passage from an essay by W. H. Auden and write an essay answer to one of four questions about the passage. The Auden selection was challenging and the questions probably sounded terrifyingly "stuffy"—

especially to a captive audience of cold, unsure freshmen who were at the additional disadvantage of being there only because their writing skill was in question. Not an ideal situation, but their responses were illuminating.

What Auden had to say in essence was this: "labor" is what you do because you have to, to get money, to live; "work" is what you do because you love it, what you would do even if you were not lucky enough to be paid for it. The last three of the four questions asked for definitions of culture, analyses of the relationship between social classes, speculations about the direction of western civilization—all three questions drawn more or less from Auden's essay. The first question, however, was approximately this: "Based on your own experiences, or the experiences of your family or friends, to what extent do you agree with Auden's distinction between work and labor?" Of the ten examination essays I was asked to read, nine were about the last three questions, and all nine were unsatisfactory. Only one passed, and it was the only one to answer the first question: "I agree with Auden's distinction between 'work' and 'labor' because while I was growing up I saw that my father was sometimes a worker and sometimes a laborer."

I understand that failure on this exam was due to a variety of causes, and that the single success was due to more than that one student's choice of questions. But when I showed the passing essay to my students in the remedial course that followed the exam, they were unanimously surprised because they had all been taught that they were not permitted to write about themselves or their experience. The question had asked them explicitly for their opinion based on their experience, but they were not able to believe that it meant what it said because they were supposed to be writing, they knew, an "essay."

Even when the idea is general, a reference to ourselves may give it clarity and force. Loren Eisley writes about the secret of life—as abstract a subject, perhaps, as one could find—by describing himself rummaging around in the autumnal refuse of an empty field near his home. George Orwell indicts colonialism for its debilitating effect on the colonizers themselves by telling the story of how he was shamed into shooting an elephant. In fact, it is *only* in reference to ourselves—to the extent that we have been able to grasp the meaning of an idea in our world, to integrate it with what we already know or feel—that we can know or learn anything. But we have isolated experience from thought for our students (if not for ourselves) in the way we teach writing, making it very difficult for them to write about their ideas as if (even if) they really care about them.

In a Subject A class, for example, I asked my students to write an essay evaluating James Degnan's argument that schools encourage "babble"—inflated, vapid gobbledygook—by assigning textbooks written in it and by rewarding students adept in it with A's.[3] Here are the conclusions to two of my students' essays:

> Professors assign books that more than seldom contain babble. More important than learning new words is understanding root words because language is mostly general until people start talking about different meanings. For example the word "throw" can mean to project, to cause to go, i.e. "to throw a bridge across a river, to throw a man into prison," to connect, to engage, to permit an opponent to win a race, to cause to fall off, i.e. "thrown by a horse," and "throw" has twenty more definitions. The texts are needed for students to learn the professional jargon necessary for their careers. All students working towards their career goals have a special language to learn that can be loaded with babble. Many people think that many words have the same meanings, which is not true. Usually there is a more appropriate word they can learn if they take the time to look.

(That is it. End essay. When the students had read this, one of them blurted out with acute directness, "That sounds like it has a lot of 'babble' in it." Here is the concluding paragraph to the second:)

> Writing babble is unconsciously taught by instructors because they demand lengthy essays and encourage inappropriate diction. I can profess this to be true, since I am the product of such teachers. Until my Subject A class, I got A's and B's for unclear, verbose writing. I wrote such phrases as "due to the fact that" instead of "because" and "formulates" when I meant "creates." I believe that I would have made an "art" out of it, if I had not been told to stop and look at whether I was really saying anything clearly and succinctly.

The writer of the second essay had clearly discovered something the writer of the first had not, that her experience was relevant and rhetorically valuable. In an essay on whether schools encourage "babble" the writer of the first went off on a formless and inconclusive tangent about the multiple meanings of words. The second, however, realized that the best evidence of the effect of academic jargon (Macrorie's "engfish") on student writing was her own writing, which she then illustrated with pointed detail.

So we must not isolate our students' feelings from their thoughts. We must broaden their perspectives on the world, yes, but in such a way that they are able to integrate themselves with it. Robert Hogan's poem "After Sending Freshmen to Describe a Tree" ends with the line: "For God's sake and mine, look *outside* your heart and write."[4] And in one sense he is right, as all our teachers were. But our students need also to be taught that they can only find conviction for their ideas in their experience, and that the moment of their experience, however personal and limited, can lend their essays matchless force.

As a complement to this emphasis on their *use* of experience, we should

also assign our students writing *about* their personal experience. Valuable in itself, such writing also helps students learn to write more exactly and directly. One of the causes of the inflated gobbledygook of expository essays (as Orwell has explained in "Politics and the English Language") is that the words tend to lose specific reference, tend to float free of any concrete ground by which their accuracy or logic or even honesty can be measured. If a writer, however, describes his first visit to the beach in Hawaii with this sentence, "When my eyes first caught the azure blue, my walk turned into a run," you can ask him, "Really?" The question is easily answerable here (as it tends not to be about abstract sentences) because the student can refer to the concrete experience which his words purport to describe. When I asked "really?" about this Hawaii sentence, the writer was able to say, "Well, no...not exactly." At that moment he was confronting directly the meaning of what he had written.

It is a frustrating, embarrassing, ultimately liberating experience to focus sharply on the meanings of our words. I often find that like my student I do not mean exactly what I have said. This dismaying discovery, though, also reminds me that words *can* operate precisely and that it is my job, as a writer, to use them so. Our students need this discovery, too, and I have found that they can make it most readily when they are writing about their personal experience.

A freshman writer at the University of Santa Clara turned in the following sentences as the introduction to her first college essay:

> A major problem that is posed to young individuals and their personal identities is that of conformity. The world is full of pressures trying to merge many different personalities and values into one person with acceptable traits....

Really? She had an inchoate idea about conformity beneath these sentences, but it is not literally true that "the world is full of pressure trying to merge many different personalities and values into one person." She could not recognize this because, at the level of abstraction which she assumed college requires, she thought the sentence was perfectly accurate. (This was college, after all, she said later; wasn't this the kind of writing that was expected?) What freed her writing from this kind of pretense, or at least allowed her to begin to assess the precision of her words and sentences, was her next essay. There she wrote about being lost as a little girl at a terrifying pistol shooting demonstration, and then found; and there she was able to write exactly, testing her words as she went against her vividly remembered fear.

We should recognize in her explanation, however, how responsible *we* are for the academic pretense in our students' writing. We tell them they are in high school now and should write more complexly than they did in elementary school; or that when they get to college, or graduate school, they are going to have to be able to write with more sophistication. We

build up their word-power and teach them to use a thesaurus (wrongly) for the basest of reasons—so they will sound "smart." At least that is *their* impression. At all four of the colleges where I have taught writing, my students have eventually volunteered that *that* is the reason for their consciously artificial language: when you write an essay, they say, you don't want to sound "dumb" or "like you're still in high school." (A former student of mine, even then an administrator in the middle of a successful academic career, was secretly terrified that his writing made him sound "too simple" because it was relatively free of the jargon that decorated the essays of his fellow graduate students.) And we make them read, without apology or apparently any notice, mountains of muck.

The following paragraph illustrates the enormous liability our students labor under. Written as part of an essay about a book assigned for a religion course, it was submitted to me as a piece of self-explanatory expository prose. (The bracketed comments are mine.)

> According to what Dulles [the author of the book in question] calls "the principle of incarnation" the gospel demands to be realized in distinctive ways in different social contexts. These differences are based somewhat on differing emphasis on one or another secondary authority. Furthermore [?], pluriformity [undefined] is necessary to Christianity because: 1) the Christian revelation should be thematized [?] in terms of the expressive materials offered by any given culture, 2) faith should adapt its forms of thought and expression to the successive situations where it finds itself, 3) pluriformity [still undefined] is encouraged, furthermore [the second sign of the writer's misplaced confidence in the compelling logic of his paragraph], by the diversity of secondary authorities emphasized [by whom?]....

(But we can only fully understand the causes of this impenetrable writing if we read Dulles, the author my student was trying to understand and explain; the next and last sentence of the paragraph gives us a taste:)

> ...As Dulles puts it "by holding a multitude of irreducibly distinct articulations in balance one can best position oneself to hear what God may be saying here and now."

"What does this *mean*?" I asked as neutrally as I could. Pause—and the pause is as vivid for me still as his answer—"I don't know."

I am not arguing that we should encourage our students to trivialize complex ideas, to thin them for "the man on the street." Expository essays, like all writing, should be written for as particular an audience as possible; that audience is hardly ever the man on the street. But even for an expert audience our language should be exact. Some years ago, I am told, Monroe Hirsch, the Dean of the University of California School of Optometry,

publicly chastised his colleagues for obscuring their ideas with jargon and convoluted sentences which even professional optometrists could not decipher. There is a measurable distinction, he was arguing, between exact and obscure technical writing.

This distinction is usefully illustrated for me by two paragraphs, both about the same subject, both written at the same time under the same conditions—during a midterm examination in an upper division Geology course at U.C. Berkeley.[5] I do not know what "magma" is; if you don't, so much the better. The difference between these two paragraphs is apparent even to an in-expert audience.

> Viscosity of magma affects the texture of a rock by its ability to change position in the respect of raising to a higher level allowing the magma to cool faster giving glossy texture. In lavas the same hold but the environment differs in that it may be exposed allowing even faster cooling. The moving magma due to low viscosity may pick up rock particles will alter texture.

This paragraph was written in exam conditions, at speed and under duress, so ignore the syntactic slips. They are not, in any event, what makes this paragraph hard to read, nor is the vocabulary, nor even is the subject. This paragraph is opaque because it does not express precisely the *relationship* between the viscosity of magma and the crystalline texture of rock. But this relationship *can* be expressed precisely and (if it is) can be at least provisionally understood, even by readers who do not understand geology. Witness the second paragraph, written during the same exam:

> If the viscosity of magma is high, the movement of ions toward centers of crystallization is impeded. Therefore more and smaller crystals tend to form. On the other hand, if the magma is very slightly viscous, there is rapid movement of ions toward centers of crystallization which attract the ions, and fewer and larger crystals form.

This student, from the first crucial word "if," was writing exactly, deploying technical terms economically and in a sequence whose logic is both manifest and sure: *If* X, then A and *therefore* B; *on the other hand, if* Y, then C and D. Complex, technical, but perfectly lucid.

Geology is a long way from personal experience, but the writing about both operates on the same principle, and it is the principle finally that we should try to teach our students: that the language is capable of powerful precision and that if we demand such precision of our own words and of each other's, our thought will become more accurate, more logical, even more honest.

One of my current students, a teacher with years of experience in the classroom, wrote the following sentence as part of an essay advocating

curriculum reform: "This philosophical framework will provide the tools to extract appropriate environmental and human resource descriptions." What she meant, we worked out together, was approximately this:

If my assumptions about the nature of learning and the purpose of education are correct,	*This philosophical framework*
we ought, as teachers,	*will provide the tools to extract*
to organize our classrooms and approach our students in certain ways which I will now outline.	*environmental and human resource appropriate descriptions*

Why did she write the sentence the way she did? I have been describing some of the reasons here—her fear of being personal, the powerful spell of abstract academic gobbledygook, the desire to sound intelligent, and a hazy conception of just what her idea was. But if in all these ways her sentence illustrates the weaknesses to which expository writing is vulnerable, it is still very much like the Hawaii sentence: "When my eyes caught the azure blue, my walk turned into a run." Really? No.

So we assign personal experience writing to our students to teach them to imagine concretely what they mean—what they saw and did and felt and thought—and to show them how to ask of their own sentences "really?" We are helping them discover that they do not have to fake their writing, that they can simply admit their thrill at the sight of that splendid ocean. And that they can say simply "classrooms" instead of "environmental resource" and "students" instead of "human resource." We are helping them take *both* themselves and their ideas seriously and to write, finally caring most for the truth.

III

One of the reasons that students tend not to take their ideas seriously is that they do not believe they *have* any ideas. There are other reasons. Like all of us, they are less interested in some subjects, less committed to some ideas than to others. And essay assignments are notoriously awful: "discuss the rise of the Greek city-states" gives *no* writer enthusiasm, or even direction. But a crucial reason derives from their sense of themselves as *student* writers, as *pretending* to write, as not having anything genuine to say. William Irmscher has described this experience in terms of their attitude toward their audience, an attitude reflecting as well their attitude toward themselves.[6] Writers may have various relationships with their audiences, Irmscher explains, depending on the degree to which one or the other of them is expert. An expert to an expert, an expert to an amateur, an amateur to an amateur—all of these relations between writer and audience permit the writer to take himself and his idea seriously. Most students assume, however, and perhaps unwittingly we encourage their assuming, the relationship that makes writing most difficult—amateur to expert, student writing to teacher, student pretending to know a little to teacher who knows it all.

My third suggestion, therefore, is that we help our students get so involved with their subject that they become expert, that they develop a genuine intention to write, and that they consequently care for the truth of what they say.

One way to accomplish this goal is to have them share their material. If we have them read and write about the same text—not because it is the only text for which we have enough copies; not because it is on The Syllabus for American Lit.—they can all then measure their interpretations and assertions against a common standard, available to them all. It is my experience that discussions deteriorate at a speed directly proportional to the secrecy of the crucial information; I can not argue with someone who has private access to the facts. So we should get the facts out in the center of the room—in this case, a common text, *Macbeth* or *Patterns in Culture. When someone speculates about the motives of Lady Macbeth,* then, everyone can assess that speculation; when someone argues that the serenity of Zuni culture was really enervation, the evidence of the text is there to challenge him. The search for truth is collaborative. The more we encourage this collaboration among our students, the more they will become involved with their subject.

I suggest that *we immerse* them in the subject if possible, using not only a common text, but a common body of material—all the stuff we can gather about the damming of rivers for hydroelectric power, about the history of whorehouses in our town, about desert flowers or marine mammals or race cars, about the concentration camps in eastern Europe. I put together such a body of material about the Bakke case while it was being argued before the Supreme Court, a stapled-together, xeroxed compilation of almost "raw" data: newspaper clippings, abstracts of lower court decisions, transcripts of correspondence among the principals, letters to the editor. The first of a series of assignments was to sift through this material (everyone had a copy of everything) and to report on a particular aspect of it: what happened, who the principal figures were, what the essential arguments of the lawyers were, and so on. Everyone was limited to the material in the xeroxed packet; if the students knew about relevant information that had been omitted, they could use it only if they brought a copy for everyone to add to the packet (no secret data). The final assignment was to argue in an essay, based on the information in which they had become expert, whether the affirmative action program which had excluded Bakke was or ought to have been found unconstitutional. (Such an idea, I now realize, is not new. For a few years in the late 1950's "casebooks" in a variety of different fields were quite popular as texts for writing classes. Unfortunately, the fad passed, and all the books are out of print. There ought to be a new series.)

I made up the packets for the Bakke unit myself, but one might also organize a unit in which the *students* collect the data about a subject they have selected. Or one might dispense with the packet altogether. I gave my students a deliberately general essay assignment in which I specified only the broad subject—Northern Ireland. Their initial job was to start looking for information about Northern Ireland and to bring back to class whatever they found. Their information came in haltingly, some of it redundant, some of it fragmented, some of it vivid and terrible. But it was a collaboration in the making: when one student ran out of sources on the peace movement, another came up with a fascinating article about it that she had just read while looking for something else. The essays were finally on different aspects of the large subject of Northern Ireland, but in the process the students had immersed themselves, together, in the subject.

What I am describing here is research, not as a separate activity with note cards and bibliography cards and formal outlines and hours of wandering aimlessly among library shelves, but as an activity integral with writing about ideas. And not as an activity which one performs alone but in the midst of a conversation with others involved in the same or a similar search—a conversation by means of which one's questions are clarified, direction focused, knowledge enriched, a conversation by means of which one becomes expert.

For increasing students' immersion in the subjects of their essays, Ken Macrorie has developed as assignment which he calls the "I-Search" paper.[7] The premise of the assignment is sound—that students need to care about their ideas to write purposeful expository essays, and that one way to foster that care is to have them write about their own searches, to make the search the subject of the essay. I think this is a good assignment, but I think we should do more. Macrorie's assignment has students focus on themselves; I think they should be able to focus, too, on their ideas, to believe that they know enough to think and write something significant, to believe that their ideas have inherent value. Only when they do will they be able to write expository essays of clarity and power.

Besides needing confidence in their expertise, however, students need also the *intention* to write, and this requires that they have an audience, a real, demanding, attentive audience. Traditionally, in school, their teachers are their audience. This is frequently the source of the paralyzing intimidation I have described. But if we are to help them feel more confident about themselves, we must also *listen* to them when they address us in their essays; we must take them seriously. Students do not think we do. They think we are interested in how long their essays are or in how neat their handwriting is, in how many library sources they cite or in how close they can come to *our* idea about *their* subject. During a conference about an essay on *The Sound and the Fury*, a student told me that I was the first person who ever really wanted to know what she meant in her writing. I doubt that, but imagine how hard it must have been for her to *intend* to write, during all those years in school, for an audience that she thought was indifferent.

We can also create other audiences for our students, the most available being other students in the classroom. Small peer groups organized to read and respond to writing in progress are enormously helpful in improving expository writing.[8] (And they add wonderfully to the community spirit, to the workshop spirit, of the class.) An extension of the collaborative exploration of the subject, these groups make the writer accountable for what he says. They help eliminate the most blatant pretension. Few students are willing to read out loud to their peers the pure tripe they might submit silently and privately to a teacher. The groups also provide invaluable feedback for the writer, letting him know where his idea needs elaboration or revision, suggesting more relevant illustration (and offering specific alternatives), challenging or praising the thoroughness and perception of his argument. The other members of the group do not have to be astute readers or experienced writers; and the writer does not have to heed their suggestions. What is most important is that they are a real audience trying to grasp the sense of the writing; they make possible, therefore, quite beyond whatever specific reactions they have, the student's intention to write.

We should encourage our students also to write to a particular audience

where possible. At Alameda Community College my students wrote essays (but finally chose not to send them; I should have encouraged it more insistently) to the Army Corps of Engineers, arguing whether the dam in Maine should be completed or the endangered furbish lousewort saved. The more particular their audience—their draft board, the Lions Club Scholarship Committee, the incoming class of freshmen?—the easier it is for them to take seriously what they have to say.

We should, whenever possible, publish their writing. However it is done, and there are lots of ways, publishing makes writers careful and proud. The simplest way is to just collect their essays, xerox them (or ditto them), and staple them together. (I do this only if my students want to pay for the duplicating; they have always wanted to.) A more ambitious project was suggested to me by Taz Takahashi, who makes books with her sixth grade class in San Mateo, California: my freshman students at Santa Clara decided to make a book of essays about different aspects of the Depression. Collaborating throughout the project, they each developed a different essay idea, read and revised their essays in subject-related groups, made or found illustrations for each other's work, compiled an annotated bibliography, revised, typed, and xeroxed the whole (91 pages, only about $1.50 per book, because someone in the class got us a special break on the duplicating costs). This is the sort of expository writing they produced for their book:

> In Oakland they endured the night in giant, unsold construction pipes. In New York they made do with subways, and in Chicago they resorted to the parks. They existed in makeshift towns called "jungles" when they weren't being arrested for vagrancy. They came from all walks of life and had no real future. They were cold too often. They were hungry too often. They died too often.
>
> "They" seems a fitting pronoun for the young vagabonds of the Depression because it captures the uncertainty and anonymity of their lives. These homeless wanderers were a phenomenon which grew out of the hopelessness of the times. "Things had to be better someplace else" they kidded themselves. Fortune Magazine compared these vagabonds to the disgruntled bezprizorni of Russia who took to the road after the overthrow of their monarchy in 1917. Our wanderers never became violent like the bezprizorni, perhaps because they were too intent on the search for better times. The search for the estimated 200,000 boys my age was a difficult one. In my easy, secure life it is hard for me even to imagine the problems these vagabonds faced in finding adequate food and clothing and in traveling from town to town.

Lynda Chittenden and the fourth and fifth grade "Kids in Room 14" at Old Mill School in Mill Valley, California, went further (and it is good to

end with them, to emphasize again how possible, how valuable, exposition can be even in the early grades). I hope they describe in detail some time *how* they did it, but their book is beautiful. Called *Our Friends in the Waters*, it is full of fascinating expository writing about various classes of marine animals, all of this bordered by brilliant drawings and graphs and poems, printed, bound, copyrighted and for sale.[10] Its organization is careful and consistent, the parts all unified by a common question about the adaptability of different mammals to the sea. It is unabashedly personal, its exposition framed by excerpts like these:

> I wish I could see one breach. Any whale. Any WILD whale. I never thought anything about whales until this year. I just thought of them as one huge thing—cold blooded, like a shark. But now I think of them as one of us. My mom asks me now about the whales—she says I'm her source of information.
>
> I wish I was rich so I could go on a boat and go right by one and touch it. Then get in some scuba gear and swim with one. That's what I would like to do. I wish that I could go and hear what they are saying. I want to know what they think. I want to be a whale.

Amy Crosby, Jill Nickerson, Laura Stopes, and Whitney Wright wrote the introductory chapter to the book from which the following excerpt is taken:

> Where Did Marine Mammals Come From?
>
> Of all of today's marine mammals, the first ones whose ancestors returned to the sea are called Cetaceans (whales and dolphins). Some say they are the most perfectly adapted to their environment of all the mammals on earth. The adaptation or change was so well done that their body shape today resembles a fish. In fact, some people still think that whales are fish.
>
> Cetaceans were followed to the sea by the ancestors of Sirenians (manatees and dugongs). Then the ancestors of the Pinnipeds (seals and sea lions), and most recently the ancestors of the Sea Otter returned to the sea.
>
> Many body adaptations or changes over many millions of years were necessary for terrestrial (land) mammals to evolve into these marine (sea) mammals.

Such exposition is direct and unpretentious, accurate because it is the product of these children's long and intensive study of the sea, and committed because it reflects their love of what they studied. It is a splendid achievement, a proud book. Its writing, like all good writing, is serious and true.

NOTES

[1]Josephine Miles, "Freshman at Composition," *College Composition and Communication* II, 1 (February, 1951), pp. 7-9; reprinted in *Working Out Ideas: Predication and Other Uses of Language* (Berkeley: University of California, Berkeley/Bay Area Writing Project Curriculum Publication No. 5, 1979), pp. 5-9.

[2]I was taught this series of steps by Brother John Perron, c.s.c.

[3]"Masters of Babble: Turning Language Into Stone," *Harper's Magazine*, September, 1976, p. 27; reprinted in *Speaking of Words*, ed. James MacKillop and Donna Woolfolk Cross (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978), pp. 149-152.

[4]"After Sending Freshmen to Describe a Tree," *American Association of University Professors Bulletin* (Winter, 1957); reprinted in *College English: The First Year*, ed. Alton C. Morris *et al.* (7th ed.; New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 558.

[5]These paragraphs were included in the "Report of the Committee on Prose Improvement" written by Josephine Miles at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1952. This report has been published as "The College at Composition" in Miles' *Working Out Ideas*, pp. 10-13.

[6]*The Holt Guide to English* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), pp. 20-23.

[7]See *Searching Writing* (Rochelle Park, New Jersey: Hayden Book Co., 1980).

[8]See Thom Hawkins, *Group Inquiry Techniques for Teaching Writing* (Urbana: ERIC and NCTE, 1976); Mary K. Healy, *Using Student Writing Response Groups in the Classroom* (Berkeley: University of California, Berkeley/Bay Area Writing Project Curriculum Publication No. 12, 1980).

[9]In *The Write Occasion* (Berkeley: University of California, Berkeley/Bay Area Writing Project Collaborative Research Study No. 1, 1980), Patrick Woodworth describes a classroom project in which his tenth grade students write a "Freshman Handbook" for incoming ninth graders. He argues that this sense of a real audience for their work results in the best writing they do all year.

[10]*Our Friends in the Waters* may be purchased by sending $5.00, plus $1.00 to cover postage and handling, to Lynda Chittenden, Old Mill School, 352 Throckmorton, Mill Valley, CA 94941.